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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest discusses reasons for using cooperative learning approaches in preschool centers and primary school classrooms, ways to implement the strategy, and the long-term benefits for children's education. It is pointed out that early childhood educators can use many of the strategies currently used to encourage cooperation and interaction in older children. Ten basic steps for the successful implementation of cooperative learning activities are listed. (RH)

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ERIC Digest

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Cooperative Learning Strategies and Children

Lawrence Lyman and Harvey C. Foyle

Cooperative learning is a teaching strategy involving children's participation in small group learning activities that promote positive interaction. This digest discusses the reasons for using cooperative learning in centers and classrooms, ways to implement the strategy, and the long-term benefits for children's education.

Why Try Cooperative Learning?

Cooperative learning promotes academic achievement, is relatively easy to implement, and is not expensive. Children's improved behavior and attendance, and increased liking of school, are some of the benefits of cooperative learning (Slavin, 1987).

Although much of the research on cooperative learning has been done with older students, cooperative learning strategies are effective with younger children in preschool centers and primary classrooms. In addition to the positive outcomes just noted, cooperative learning promotes student motivation, encourages group processes, fosters social and academic interaction among students, and rewards successful group participation.

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Can Cooperative Learning Be Used in Early Childhood Classes?

When a child first comes to a structured educational setting, one of the teacher's goals is to help the child move from being aware only of himself or herself to becoming aware of other children. At this stage of learning, teachers are concerned that children learn to share, take turns, and show caring behaviors for others. Structured activities which promote cooperation can help to bring about these outcomes. One of the most consistent research findings is that cooperative learning activities improve children's relationships with peers, especially those of different social and ethnic groups.

When children begin to work on readiness tasks, cooperation can provide opportunities for sharing ideas, learning how others think and react to problems, and practicing oral language skills in small groups. Cooperative learning in early childhood can promote positive feelings toward school, teachers, and peers. These feelings build an important base for further success in school.

What Are the Advantages of Cooperative Learning for Elementary School Students?

According to Glasser (1986), children's motivation to work in elementary school is dependent on the extent to which their basic psychological needs are met. Cooperative learning increases student motivation by providing peer support. As part of a learning team, students can achieve success by working well with others. Students are also encouraged to learn material in greater depth than they might otherwise have done, and to think of creative ways to convince the teacher that they have mastered the required material.

Cooperative learning helps students feel successful at every academic level. In cooperative learning teams, low-achieving students can make contributions to a group and experience success, and all students can increase their understanding of ideas by explaining them to others (Featherstone, 1986).

Components of the cooperative learning process as described by Johnson and Johnson (1984) are complimentary to the goals of early childhood education. For example, well-constructed cooperative learning tasks involve positive interdependence on others and individual accountability. To work successfully in a cooperative learning team, however, students must also master interpersonal skills needed for the group to accomplish its tasks.

Cooperative learning has also been shown to improve relationships among students from different ethnic backgrounds. Slavin (1980) notes: "Cooperative learning methods [sanctioned by the school] embody the requirements of cooperative, equal status interaction between students of different ethnic backgrounds..."

For older students, teaching has traditionally stressed competition and individual learning. When students are given cooperative tasks, however, learning is assessed individually, and rewards are given on the basis of the group's performance (Featherstone, 1986). When children are taught the skills needed for group participation when they first enter a structured setting, the foundation is laid for later school success.

How Can Teachers Use Cooperative Learning Strategies?

Foyle and Lyman (1988) identify the basic steps involved in successful implementation of cooperative learning activities:

1. The content to be taught is identified, and criteria for mastery are determined by the teacher.

2. The most useful cooperative learning technique is identified, and the group size is determined by the teacher.

3. Students are assigned to groups.

4. The classroom is arranged to facilitate group interaction.

5. Group processes are taught or reviewed as needed to assure that the groups run smoothly.

6. The teacher develops expectations for group learning and makes sure students understand the purpose of the learning that will take place. A time line for activities is made clear to students.

7. The teacher presents initial material as appropriate, using whatever techniques she or he chooses.

8. The teacher monitors student interaction in the groups, and provides assistance and clarification as needed. The teacher reviews group skills and facilitates problem-solving when necessary.

9. Student outcomes are evaluated. Students must individually demonstrate mastery of important skills or concepts of the learning. Evaluation is based on observations of student performance or oral responses to questions; paper and pencil need not be used.

10. Groups are rewarded for success. Verbal praise by the teacher, or recognition in the class newsletter or on the bulletin board can be used to reward high-achieving groups.

Conclusion

Early childhood educators can use many of the same strategies and activities currently being used to encourage cooperation and interaction in older children. Effective cooperative learning experiences increase the probability of children's success throughout their school years.

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